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ABSTRACT

The personal stories of young women who have either dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out, reveal a complex set of perceptions, interpretations, and contradictions regarding the roles of race, gender, and class in their behavior and attitudes. A one-year research project was conducted in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) with 75 females, aged 13 to 19, who had either dropped out, dropped out and returned to school, or were considered to be at-risk of dropping out. Six semi-structured focus groups were organized for interviewing. Four groups were composed of at-risk students from a variety of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Two of the groups were composed of women who had dropped out of school, and were enrolled in a community based dropout program. The participants were encouraged to tell their individual stories, offer insights into their own experiences, and make observations on the experiences of others. Their responses are organized into the following broad areas: (1) reasons for leaving; (2) experiences in school; (3) thoughts about returning; and (4) recommendations for improvement. The appendix contains autobiographical sketches written by three of the participants. A brief list of references is also included. (FMW)

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IN THEIR OWN VOICES:

YOUNG WOMEN TALK ABOUT DROPPING OUT

A Report from the Project on Equal Education Rights
NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund
Washington, D.C. -- August 26, 1988

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PEER, the Project on Equal Education Rights of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, is one of the leading national advocacy programs for educational equity for women and girls of all racial and ethnic groups. Its National Affiliate Network links activists and educators in a national community of concern for the advancement of women and girls. Since its inception in 1974, PEER has conducted advocacy projects and research studies that raise serious questions about the link between gender stereotyping and dropping out of school, early parenting, continued occupational segregation, and the overall prospects for economic security and well-being of women and girls in this country. This report on female drop outs suggests that the educational, economic and social implications of this link have serious consequences on the behavior and attitudes of urban female teenagers. We present this report with appreciation and acknowledgement of the participation and contribution of the 75 teenagers who shared their stories with us and of Nancie Zane who listened.

In Their Own Voices: Young Women Talk About Dropping Out was written by Nancie Zane of the Center for Effective Public Policy, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, under a contract with PEER to design and conduct focus group research on the drop out behavior of urban teenage girls. This report is the result of the information gathered from interviews with six focus groups of 75 females, aged 13 to 19 in Philadelphia, who had either dropped out, dropped out and returned to school, or were considered at risk of dropping out. This volume brings together a collective voice of the pain and pleasures of every day life, in and out of school, as expressed in the compelling stories of 75 individual women.

The research study on which this report is based was supported by the Women's Educational Equity Act Program of the U.S. Department of Education under Grant Number G008610654. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement by the Department of Education should be inferred.
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Introduction

The national female drop out rate is 12.6 percent, rising as high as 17 percent for female students living in urban areas. Two of the operational questions plaguing educators, parents, practitioners, and social scientists are "why" and "what can we do about it?" While much of the drop out literature has been heavily weighted towards identifying the individual, academic, and familial deficiencies of both male and female drop outs, voices that link dropping out to a complex web of larger structural problems have more recently surfaced.[1] From this perspective, factors contributing to the cause of drop out behavior need to be reviewed in a simultaneous analysis of race, class, and gender. These structural factors, compounded by the realities of overcrowded, under-resourced classrooms, create seemingly insurmountable hurdles for many young people. In light of these obstacles, the powerful structural critique gleaned from students who leave school,[2] as well as the resilience of those who remain or return there, command attention.

In addition, the interpretation of the overall drop out problem has emphasized the experience of boys as normative, thus blurring gender differences that may exist in the reasons for dropping out. New research which looks more closely at the issue of young women dropping into and out of school, and which examines the differences between the experiences of male and female students and drop outs[3] has raised questions about the links between gender stereotyping, dropping out of school, and

becoming teenage parents.[4]

In an attempt to expand the existing information base and illuminate these often opaque relationships, PEER (Project on Equal Education Rights of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund) developed a multi-faceted one-year project. Part of this project consisted of interviewing between sixty and eighty young women in semi-structured focus groups. The intention was to recognize the legitimacy of their "voices" in unraveling the problem, and to provide us with insight into the beliefs, attitudes and experiences of these women.

Given its one year timeline and limited financial and personnel resources, PEER chose to concentrate on one urban area -- Philadelphia -- a city wrestling with a growing drop out rate and a high pregnancy rate.[5] This report describes the themes that can be discerned in the stories of the women who participated in these focus groups. Listening to their stories both sheds new light on and raises additional questions about the problem of female drop outs.

Six focus groups were arranged. The groups were to be composed of young women of different races and socioeconomic status, between the ages of 13 and 19, who had either dropped out, dropped out and returned, or were considered "at risk" of dropping out. Four groups were located within the school system and were composed of students who were labeled by the school system as "high risk" -- defined as students who had previously dropped out and returned, or had poor academic performance, high

absenteeism, and/or were one or more years behind grade level. Two of the groups came from schools that are situated in the northeast section of Philadelphia: the participants in the first group were drawn from a racially diverse, poor, and working class high school with a 22 percent drop out rate; those in the second group were from a junior high "feeder" school with similar features. A third group was held on the northwest side of the city in a virtually all-Black middle-class school with an 11 percent drop out rate. The fourth was in a largely working class and poor, Black and Hispanic high school with a drop out rate of 17 percent.[6]

The other two groups consisted of young women between the ages of 15 and 19 who had officially dropped out of school a minimum of six months earlier. Since finding students who were no longer on the school's rolls was an arduous task, we decided to work through established GED and vocational programs. We identified two racially mixed drop out programs: one in central Philadelphia and one in north Philadelphia. Our original intention was to solicit additional drop outs who were not currently affiliated with any program by asking potential focus group participants to bring friends to the interview session. Unfortunately, we succeeded in locating only two drop outs who were not involved with some kind of community-based program. Thus, while we collected meaningful data from the young women associated with the out-of-school programs, the information represents the views of a rather select population of drop outs-

-those who have chosen, for a variety of reasons, to continue their educational or vocational training.[7] Although five of the six groups included at least two teen mothers, the focus group facilitators consistently limited discussions about early parenting because of the blatantly negative judgments that the non-parenting teens expressed in relation to teen pregnancy. Given the significance of the issue, however, the facilitators negotiated with PEER to run an additional focus group of mostly Black and Hispanic pregnant and parenting teens who are participating in Philadelphia's Comprehensive Teen Parenting program and are working towards either their high school diploma or their GED. This enabled pregnant teens and teen mothers to talk in a nonjudgmental environment about their experiences.

In all, we interviewed 75 women: 24 percent white, 57 percent Black, 17 percent Hispanic, and two percent "other." Of the total population, 40 percent had dropped out and were in the process of getting their GED; 16 percent had dropped out and later returned to school; and 34 percent had never officially left but were considered "at risk" of leaving. The 50 young women who were still in the school system (including five who were working towards their GED) collectively had an estimated 1,500 days of absences in the 1986-87 school year. Over 85 percent of the participants had been held back at least once, and approximately 20 percent had stayed back more than once, a factor considered to be the single most important predictor of dropping out.[8]

Findings

All of the young women who participated in the focus groups generously offered their individual "stories" and insights concerning their experiences inside and outside of schools. Not surprisingly, collective patterns emerged within and across the groups. The findings are organized into four sections:

1. Reasons for Leaving: Teens' assumptions about why others leave; their own reasons for leaving (or for contemplating it); their perceptions concerning male-female differences in relation to dropping out; and their experiences of the leaving process itself.

2. Experiences in School: The best and worst aspects of school; the differences young women perceive in the treatment of boys vs. the treatment of girls by teachers, principals, and counselors; their own relationships with boys; and the differential treatment of students based on race.

3. Thoughts About Returning: Perceived importance of the high school diploma and/or GED, and the latter's relationship to the young women's visions for the future.

4. Teens' Recommendations to Anyone Who Will Listen: Their fantasies of the ideal school, and their advice to parents, teachers, the "system," and other teens.

Reasons for Leaving

In response to the question, "What are the one or two most important reasons why other young people leave school?," the women in the group replied with many of the same answers that have been published in the official government reports,[9] i.e., poor academic performance ("They think they are dumb so they give up"); students don't like school ("School's boring and kids are sick of being ignored"); marriage or pregnancy; and the desire or need for work. In addition, participants also listed using and selling drugs ("Once you make a lot of money by being on the corner and selling drugs, it's really hard to go back to school or think about minimum wage work"). Peer pressure was another reason ("Teens have a lot of pressure to act a certain way. If one person drops out, others follow. If they don't, they might not be accepted, and that's a lot of stress"). They also mentioned uncaring, uncreative, and unjust teachers ("Teachers are always putting the students down -- making you stand up and read when you don't know how -- and then passing you on to get you out of the class"); and pressing family problems ("I have a friend whose father died and whose mother can't work so she had to go out and get a job to take care of them").

Self-reported Reasons for Leaving

When we delved more deeply into these young women's personal reasons for leaving or wanting to leave, their descriptions were more textured, layered with the pains and delights of their

everyday lives. One Hispanic woman spoke movingly of a family problem that created irreconcilable conflict for her between her role as a daughter and as a student: "Mother has seizures, and I would want to stay home with her when she got really, really sick. She urged me to go to school but I couldn't when I was worrying about her." For some, school was a place which offered little shelter from the exigencies of home life: "If you have problems at home and you want to run away from the problems, you can't come to school -- that's the first place they will look for you." Clearly, adults in the school system did not seem to be viewed as people with whom these youth could/would share their concerns.

With over two-thirds of the teens having been held back, many described the embarrassment of failure and the frustration of not learning: "I'd come home from school and ask myself, 'What did I learn today?' They did stuff on the Board but it didn't really help. I'd have to say, 'Nothing, I didn't learn nothing.'" For several of the Hispanic women, the language barriers exacerbated the situation: "I couldn't learn anything. My English isn't very good and nobody would help me." One young woman from Jamaica woefully said, "I dropped out because I always got left back. I wasn't smart enough. When I went to school, kids laugh at me and say, 'Oh, you're from Jamaica, you're from the Banana Boat.'"

The women attributed their poor and/or failing grades to a variety of factors. Some saw themselves as stupid or unable to

learn, reflecting the relationship between poor academic performance and low self-esteem. A few labeled themselves as lazy and uncooperative. Most, however, placed the blame with teachers, the nature of their course work, and the educational system as a whole. Repeatedly, students described scenarios where teachers allegedly told them in mid-year they were failing their class and that no amount of progress would change the situation. Confronted with that information, they chose to leave the class. One student, acknowledging the power difference between students and teachers, asked, "How come a teacher can drop a student, but a student can't drop a teacher? How come we have no say in who teaches us?" She went on to say, "I went down to my counselor and asked if I could get the class changed, and she said "no" because too many people wanted to get out of that class. But I figure, if so many people are coming to get their class changed, that should be telling you something."

Although a few participants questioned the notion that the problem was located with the teacher ("They act to you just the way you act to them. What do you expect when there are so many wild kids?"), many of the drop outs voiced the belief that teachers were bored themselves, were only there to get paid, and had the attitude: "I have mine [education], I don't care if you get yours or not."

A few of the women who had dropped out, returned, and dropped out again, complained that the course work was not challenging enough. "I was passing my classes but I wasn't ever

there. When I happened to go and there was a test, I passed with flying colors." Another woman explained, "I had been in the mentally gifted class when I was younger. When I got to high school, they put me into regular classes and virtually ignored me. I got pregnant, had a child, and when I came back six months later, they were teaching the same things."

Several women who had high rates of absenteeism correlated their poor grades with their absences. They described two phenomena that they believed increased their propensity to cut. One was the problem of escalating absences; first cutting one class, and then several, and then full days. "Once you start cutting school, it's addictive. I was cutting last period and then started leaving earlier and earlier. In December, I was cutting seventh period; by April, I was cutting all my classes." Another woman added, "Once you start, you can't stop. Something inside of me tells me to cut even if nobody comes with me. Seems like I gotta just do it." On the other side, for those who attempted to pull themselves out of this spiralling absenteeism, both the real and imagined difficulty of reintegrating resulted in their continued absences. "When I came back I was totally lost, and over my head. The teacher wouldn't explain anything, because he said if I didn't catch up, it was my own fault -- so I flunked a few tests, and I never went back to that class." "You miss three or four days and then say, 'Do I really have to go to this class? I hate this teacher, or I hate this class.' And then I wonder, 'How am I going to make up all this work?' So I

stopped coming."

The teens linked the problem of cutting with the school's alleged ineffectual monitoring and follow-up systems. "They didn't notice I was gone for four months. Then my mom called the school because I had a doctor's appointment. They looked on my record and said, "She hasn't been here in four months. My mom was in shock." Thus, many of these young women assumed that students were unlikely to encounter any interference or intervention by the school. In asking participants to talk about the leaving process, the overwhelming majority of drop outs had not consulted any one before they left and were not contacted by the school for many months thereafter. In several cases, school personnel had purportedly waited as long as a year before they contacted the student; in other cases, they never made contact. "All they know is that it's one less student. One less student to worry about. They don't care." The perceived lack of contact simply reinforced what many students already suspected. As one young Hispanic woman quietly noted, "Nobody called me. Nobody ever noticed me when I was there so they certainly didn't notice when I was gone." With a sardonic smile, one young Black woman offered, "One lady cared about me, but she wasn't a teacher. She worked in the cafeteria. But she knew what the system was like there."

A few of the women who dropped out mentioned that truant officers had been to their homes. They described these encounters as serving to precipitate a family crisis, since parents

often panicked at the news that they could be fined if their children didn't return to school. Some teens reported being kicked out of their parent's homes as a consequence; others described being engaged in ongoing confrontations. In some instances, the truant officer was credited with helping to expedite the leaving process. As one teen said, "When I dropped out, I didn't even go to school to sign a drop out form or nothing. The truant officer came to my house and said, 'I heard you had a baby.' I said yes and I got a job so I could support her and all. She signed me right out. Gave me the papers, and I didn't need to talk to my mom or nothing."

Ironically, some drop outs commented on the fact that although they had been absent from school for long periods of time, they had not always perceived themselves as having dropped out. It was not until someone from the school called and "invited" them to drop out that they took on that status. One Black woman who had been out for three months explained, "The principal called and wanted to know if I wanted to drop out. He said that after 30 days of being absent, you can drop out if you want to. I hadn't thought about it before. He asked, 'Are you going to drop out or not?' I decided on the spot -- yes."

The teens who were still in the school system seemed to have a slightly different experience than those who had left and not returned. Although they also described school in negative ways, they had either sought someone out to talk to as they were deciding to leave or someone from the school -- usually a

counselor -- contacted them over the phone or in person soon after they started missing classes. The two categories of people these teens most frequently confided in about leaving were friends and family members. These interactions seemed to contribute either to their staying in or their returning to school. "My cousin told me I better not drop out because the only place I'll ever be able to work is Mickey D.'s [McDonald's]. She said, 'There you'll be, 50 years old with a McDonald's uniform on.'"

Students differed in their assessment of the level of assistance they received when they initiated contact with school personnel. Some expressed disappointment, "I like to stick to myself. I thought maybe a counselor in school would listen. Everybody hears what you're saying but pays you no mind. They don't help you figure out what to do." Others felt they got the support they needed. Several attributed their continuing their education to various adults in the school system. "I decided I was sick and tired of school and I wasn't going. My mom didn't know I wasn't going to school, but on the fourth day of my absence, the drop out counselor called. She persuaded me to come back." A young Black teen parent said, "The vice principal called me and told me to get into a program because I was too young to drop out. 'Besides,' he said, 'you need the education so you can teach your child.' I thought about it and called up the Comprehensive School."

Teens both in and out of the school system admitted their

participation in thwarting the system's efforts to contact their parents -- particularly when it took an impersonal form. A few people commented that the school would send a letter to their house advising their parent(s) or guardian of their truancy. When planned properly, they could intercept the letter and discard it. Others said that a machine with a pre-taped message from the principal would call. With luck, they would answer the phone, say "Thank you" to the message machine and when asked about the call could say, "Nobody, Mom, just a stupid pre-recorded advertisement."

Overall, these teens identified many of their reasons for leaving as school-based, although family problems, peer pressure, and low self-esteem also contributed to their decisions and non-decisions to leave or miss classes frequently. While they saw themselves as occasionally successful at circumventing the system, they seemed to feel less skilled at getting the system or the adults within that system to provide the kind of attention, caring, and contact they said they both needed and wanted. Although quality instruction and meaningful relationships might not be sufficient for holding kids in school, these young women certainly saw them as a necessary ingredient.

Differences Between Why Females and Males Leave School

Approximately one-third of the participants believed that young men and women drop out for the same reasons. "They both are bored and don't like school." "They both want to be part of

a crowd and play hooky with their friends." "They both do bad in school and get suspended." Others agreed that similarities existed but felt they affected girls differently than boys, or that girls had societal constraints that affected their choices. "A boy can get a job faster than a girl and will get paid more. Even if both of their families need money, it may not be worth it for a girl to drop out." Still others identified some problems that were unique to young women ("Girls get pregnant and ain't got nowhere to go") and some that seemed more specific to boys ("Girls can't be out on the street like boys selling drugs. People will think they're whores").

Physical and sexual violence were areas that both sexes experienced but in differing contexts. Several young women spoke of the physical fights in which their male family members and friends were willingly, and sometimes unwillingly, participants. While young men who were part of the same group or gang purportedly exchanged fisticuffs as the accepted manner for resolving interpersonal or intra-group conflicts, intergroup conflict was more problematic. "My cousin and his friends got jumped by some group of guys and my cousin got his arm broken. The principal couldn't do nothing, so he dropped out." Another young white woman told a frightening tale about her brother, who had no established peer group at a high school he had just begun to attend. "My brother got badly beaten and was in the hospital, and they [the school] couldn't do nothing about it. He felt like he wasn't going to be protected, so he left; not because he

wanted to, but because he had to if he wanted to survive."

The young women occasionally used physical violence against each other, but most of the violence they experienced, which was sexual as well as physical, was perpetrated by family members and other male peers and teachers. "Sometimes stepfathers molest their stepdaughters, and their mothers don't do nothing. So the girls run away and drop out of school." "My sister got jumped in the stairwell by a group of boys. The security guard heard her yelling, but he's so old that by the time he got there, they had beaten her, grabbed her pocketbook, and split." "My counselor kept 'accidently' brushing my tits as he would get up to let me out of his room. After the third time, it didn't seem like no accident."

The young women seemed to think that neither sex could expect much protection from physical violence while at school and scoffed at the security measures that schools tried to enforce. However, they viewed themselves more at risk and less able to protect themselves from sexual violence than their male counterparts. "Sometimes it happens to boys, but mostly to girls. If it's a boy, he can fight back. If it's a girl, she can fight back, but she'll still lose."

The young women disagreed about whether boys' behavior actually reflected their true feelings (or lack of feelings) or whether their behavior reflected certain male norms which required them to act in ways that were essentially dissonant with their inner, unexpressed feelings. Interestingly, the different

perspectives broke down along racial lines. Many of the Hispanic and white young women seemed to ascribe to the former belief that boys were characterologically different from girls, and their behavior manifested their "true selves." Consequently, acting indifferent to being held back, being yelled at by teachers, being disliked by friends, or dropping out was, in fact, just part of being a boy. One Hispanic woman said, "I think it's harder for a girl [to be left back] than a boy because they don't feel the way girls do. Boys can take anything. Girls are more soft-hearted. When they get teased, they get ashamed, their feelings get hurt. Boys don't care." A white woman noted, "While boys will cuss the teachers out, a girl will keep her mouth shut. Boys don't care about the teacher. A girl wouldn't say anything cuz she'd feel too guilty." On the other side, several Black women argued, " I don't think girls are more sensitive than guys. I just think guys hide it more than girls do. Boys might make you think that they don't care, but they really do." Another Black woman added, "Girls are more affectionate towards a person because they're not afraid to show their caring. A boy is not going to tell you what's on his mind." A third woman off-handedly commented, "Besides, I know a lot of girls who are just as much or even more rowdy than boys."

A factor that many of these women discussed at great length that differentially affected womens' lives and decisions to drop out was pregnancy. While the participants acknowledged that men occasionally dropped out to support or help support their new

families, women often dropped out for some period of time, if not permanently, to take care of their child. Further, students often left school during their pregnancy because of the subtle and overt negative judgments they experienced from peers, teachers, and counselors. "I dropped out because I was sick of people looking at me and whispering because I was pregnant. Teachers would say, 'Robin, I can't believe it's you! Why didn't you wait until you had a job and some money for your child?'" "Some people would say things that would make me feel embarrassed; others, I could sense their saying behind my back, 'She's stupid, I can't believe she got caught.'"

Several women said, while they had not felt directly discriminated against or harassed by friends or school personnel, they dropped out because the actual school building itself was too physically difficult to negotiate. "The school didn't ask me to leave, but it was hard to get around. I had to walk all around the school and walk up those stairs. It would take me half an hour just to walk around the school. For some reason I couldn't get an elevator key."

In short, our participants felt that differences in job opportunities, the impact of physical violence and sexual harassment, and the stigma of pregnancy impelled them toward dropping out in different ways than for boys.

EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOL

The Best and Worst Features of School

Each group was asked for an overall evaluation of school and the aspects they found the most and the least rewarding. Each group member was asked to rate on a scale from 1-10, with 1 being "terrible" and 10 "terrific," her school experience. Not surprisingly, the mean for the total population was 3.2, a score which would indicate that school was not a terrible experience, but, on the whole, was below average -- "basically bad," as one young woman said. However, the average score of those who had already dropped out was two points lower than the average of those still in school. Consequently, some of the latter were able to identify certain positive aspects of their school experience. They spoke highly of individual teachers, courses, and their social lives. Others in school as well as all of the drop outs mentioned these same categories as the worst parts of school life. Ironically, when we asked those who had dropped out or were in the Teen Parenting Program to rate their current educational experience, the mean score was a nine.

Many of the teens had favorite courses that were exciting to them and in which they felt they had learned a great deal. The four courses that were most frequently mentioned were English, Math, Science, and Home Economics (the latter because "you learn about making new things, then you eat it"). While stimulating course material was important, the key to a successful learning

experience was again the relationship between the teacher and her/his student. "When I have the right teacher, I can learn anything." "My teacher is so warm. You just go in, learn, and walk around in a glow." Particular teaching strategies and classroom processes were also positively assessed. "My teacher will give you a piece of paper, write down what she's trying to teach you, and then explain it to you. [She does] not just stand there and say this is what happened, think about it, but explains it to you on paper where you can see it. You can picture it in your mind." "Math was my best subject. The teacher would get down to the day's lesson, but towards the end of the class, we'd work in teams, get to know each other, and express feelings."

Being popular, or at least having friends, seemed to influence the teenagers' experience of school as well. "The best part of school is coming to see my friends." Lunch period also seemed to rank high among teens' favorite parts of the day: a time to see friends and a time to eat. Ironically, many of these same women complained that the price of peer acceptance was too high. It was one of the best, but also one of the worst parts of school. The demand for conformity, particularly around possessing certain material goods, was so intense that dropping out was a more viable option than confronting their perceived deficiencies. "School's a lot of competition. You gotta have your Guess jeans and Reeboks. It doesn't matter whether you have the money or not. You have to get your stuff together real quick to be accepted -- you can't afford to be an outcast." Another woman

exclaimed with exasperation, "You gotta pay more than if you go to Catholic school because of the wardrobe! God forbid if you eat in the cafeteria, you better look good!"

Teachers, teaching methods, and classroom dynamics were also major sources of dissatisfaction in the teens' school experience. Sometimes teachers' personalities were criticized, other times, their instructional processes. "When the teacher tells you to do something, but doesn't show you, I don't get it. But if you ask, she'll embarrass you. So I won't ask, and I get bored instead. When I get bored, I don't like nothing (sic)." One young Hispanic woman offered the following observation, "One of my teachers reads and reads out of the book and doesn't stop to explain. The other, after three paragraphs, stops and explains so I can understand. The first one never writes on the board; she won't stand up and write. She just doesn't give of herself to explain the novel we are reading." Some assumed their negative classroom experience had to do with class size, "I dislike having such a large class. You are afraid to say what you don't know. You never get individual instruction." Some of the teens spoke to the group dynamics: "The people who know the most are the ones the teacher helps the most. So people who are smarter get smarter because they get all the attention." Conversely, others reported that the more "disruptive" students actually got all the attention, "All the kids who are the school

terrorists get the attention. The teachers don't even deal with anybody else." In either case, many of these young women felt ignored.

Experiences Within the Alternative Programs

Given the sizeable difference in the rating of regular school programs vs. the alternative programs, we asked the teens participating in the alternative programs to share some of the aspects of the programs that influenced their positive ratings. The women listed several items:

- "we get treated like adults,"
- "teachers and counselors pay a lot of attention to us,"
- "we work in smaller groups,"
- "we come here because we want to learn,"
- "students help each other out,"
- "students get to know each other better,"
- "it's easy to have confidence here."

Differential Treatment of Males and Females by Teachers, Counselors, and Principals

More than half of the teens believed that female students were treated differently than male students by teachers and principals. They didn't have any basis to judge possible differences in counselors' behavior towards males and females.

The differences in how the teens perceived young women students being treated vs. young men manifested themselves in a number of ways. First, they believe that teachers expected

female students to be smarter and more attentive to their studies than boys. "Girls are expected to answer all the questions and get good grades, while the guys go play sports." "Seems like teachers don't call on boys as much, or if a boy can't answer, the teacher says, 'Let's help him out,' and calls on a girl real fast."* Further, the teens continued, since girls are supposed to "act like ladies," the very quiet and well dressed girls become the teachers' pets. However, when girls are disruptive (i.e., talking back to teachers or getting into verbal or physical fights), they are allegedly more severely punished by teachers and principals than boys because they are violating certain behavioral norms. "Teachers get much angrier when girls talk back to them." "Principals expect bad behavior from guys. When I got into a fight with a boy, he got detention, I got suspension!" Another angle that was offered pertaining to this dynamic, however, was that those in charge may not discipline boys, either as harshly or at all, because they're afraid that boys will react violently. "Teachers are more likely to ignore boys' bad behavior because they're afraid that guys are going to pick up chairs and stuff like that."

Then there was the observation that differential treatment was a consequence of heterosexual attraction. "Guy teachers treat girls special, let them run errands and stuff. Female

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* Interestingly, these views expressed by teen girls themselves conflict with some of the research which documents the long-term negative implications of teachers' lower expectations of girls.[10]

teachers pick boys for special things." One woman commented, "I remember a biology teacher who wanted to see up my dress. He would ask me to do things like erase the board, and then he would sit and drool as I lifted my arms up." Along similar lines, another woman added, "Guy teachers treat boys like rocks and girls like pets. My sister's teacher treated her like a baby, bought her hoagies and popcorn."

As the women recounted their experiences, we asked whether they felt that the differential treatment they experienced and witnessed had an impact on their dropping out or wanting to. Most of them shook their heads "no."

Relationships Between Males and Females

While the teens often found themselves being expected to live up to some of the teachers' and principals' stereotypical images of girls, their relationships with boys were similarly characterized. Almost every participant complained bitterly about the ways that their male peers treated them -- with extreme disrespect. "The boys treat you like you were a piece of meat." "All they want to do is get between your legs." "They say things like, 'Excuse me, you wanna pop in the locker?'" As if that weren't enough, according to the teens, boys lie: "He may be with a girl and tell his friends he did this and that, but that's wrong because the girl knows that they didn't do nothing. He's bragging that he's a man." Paradoxically, many of the same young women who disparaged boys' attitudes and actions, described the

ways in which they had organized their lives to attract and accommodate them. "My locker consists of a mirror, make-up case, brushes, hair spray, and one book. I care how anybody sees me, particularly boys. It's important to me how I look." Others talked about needing to have sex to keep their boyfriends. "Girls have sex because they think the boy will like them." Although many acknowledged they liked having sex, they found themselves engaging in sex more frequently than they would choose to in order to accommodate their partner. Ironically, the teens described a situation in which both girls and boys were preoccupied with boys; the former with their status as attractive and desirable in the eyes of their potential and actual partners; the latter with their images of themselves as sexually potent studs.

A few women saw the relationship between males and females as more reciprocal. They thought there was a mutual disrespect between the sexes and that "some girls treat boys like all they're good for is sex. I think a lot of girls like to tease them, going into school with tight jeans and tops." Others commented that there is an explicit exchange that both genders implicitly understand, "Girls want to be paid for, boys want sex." In fact, several of the women detailed their "part" in the "gender play." When asked, "Do you ever feel like you didn't act smart when you were with a boy?", some of the responses included comments like, "Yeah, makes them feel good. I'm dumb all the time," or "You know you wanna make them feel smart so they buy

you things." In a follow-up question, "How does that make you feel?", one response was "That's nature. They do it to us, we do it to them."

The Experience of Race -- Perceptual Differences

As a way to get a handle on how their racial identities impacted their experiences in school, we asked the young women to determine which racial groups (whites, Blacks, Hispanics, or Asians) in their estimation were treated the best, or worst, in their school. Several of the teens were not initially familiar with the terms "Hispanic" or "Asian." To stimulate the discussion, we gave each teen a picture of a pyramid and asked each to work individually and place the various racial groups on the rungs of the pyramid in descending order. We also told them they could put more than one group on the same level, and if the pyramid shape didn't accurately express their image of racial relations in the school, they could draw a different picture. We then asked follow-up questions concerning their answers.

Out of the various possible outcomes, 52 percent placed whites and/or Asians as the students who were treated the best, 15 percent placed Blacks at the top of the hierarchy, 28 percent said all groups were treated equally, and five percent said Hispanics were treated the best. For the group that placed whites and/or Asians on top, approximately 80 percent thought Blacks and Hispanics were treated about the same and placed them together on the second rung. An additional 20 percent believed

Blacks were treated better than Hispanics. The 15 percent that had Blacks at the top of the pyramid placed whites and Asians second, and Hispanics last. The small percentage that identified Hispanics on top put whites and Blacks second and Asians last.

The majority of teens who perceived privileged treatment for whites and Asians attributed it to either the personal characteristics they assumed whites and Asians possessed or to the racial prejudice that is exhibited against the other groups. "Asians and whites are quieter and smarter. Blacks and Hispanics like to fight. They're wild, so teachers respond differently." Contradictory views were, "Blacks were treated really badly in my school. Teachers didn't pay much attention to them, and if something went wrong, it was always them they were pointing the finger at. Could have been a white kid down the corner that busted the school window, but they always pointed the finger at Black kids," and "It doesn't matter what color the teacher is. They see what white and Asian students want, but ignore Black and Hispanic students. Then they wonder why Blacks and Hispanics start to cuss them."

Sometimes the participants made the distinction between whites and Asians -- that whites got better treatment just because of their skin color, while Asians "earned" their privileges. "Whites always have top choices." "If a Black person messes with a white person, and a teacher sees it, she's going to cuss you out because you're messing with her kind." "Asians are different. They'd be sitting in the classroom with their hands

folded with their homework done before anybody else came into the classroom." In either case, many expressed their dismay at the implications of these two groups being advantaged over the others. "There are a lot of whites who still want to treat Blacks inferior." "Society doesn't give Blacks messages, like they do Asians or whites, that they can make it. That hurts." One young white woman trying to explain her understanding of "rowdy" Black and Hispanic students commented, "Sometimes Blacks and Hispanics are more rowdy, but you need to think why. If I'm in class and I see favoritism, well I'm going to do things to get noticed, too."

One young Black woman told the following story which both symbolized her experience as a Black in a predominantly white school and embodied her analysis:

> My teacher would be teaching us history and they'd be talking about the slaves and stuff, and this man, he didn't give Blacks any credit.... He made Black people sound like idiots. So he and I would get into it on a daily basis and he'd kick me out and I'd leave and come back the next day. But, you know.... we have a right to ask questions, especially if there was something I didn't understand or thought he was wrong. But then I'd get suspended.... Finally, when I switched schools and there were more Blacks in it, we studied James Baldwin. I was so happy I could study about my people. What a relief. That's a problem for Black people, when they don't know about their own history. They think white people are smarter.

The students who placed Hispanics on the bottom did so because they perceived that "Hispanics are in limbo somewhere. The teachers don't pay much attention to them. I don't think it's very fair, since they have just as much right to be in that school as we do. They're there to learn, too." One white

student noted, "A lot of people laugh at them and make fun of their accents." Interestingly, several white and Black teens perceived Hispanics' difficulty in mastering English as their ticket to the top of the pyramid as well: "A lot of Hispanics have trouble talking and understanding and need more help. Teachers are always giving them more attention because of it."

When Blacks were viewed as being on the top of the pyramid, it was in the context of a racially mixed school where "teachers were scared of them, and they could do anything in the school." A white woman complained: "I was in a fight with a Black girl, and a Black teacher came up and held me with my hands behind my back and let her hit me."

The majority of the youth who indicated that all groups were treated equally attended the almost-all Black schools where a handful of white and Jamaican students were enrolled. Even though a large proportion of the teachers were white, "our experience is that they treat us right." One young woman's understanding of this was that "where Blacks are the overwhelming majority, there doesn't seem to be as much prejudice. In my old school, where there were fewer Blacks, when a white person was running down the hall, the teacher wouldn't do anything, but if it was a Black person, he'd get sent to the office."

When we asked whether they experienced discriminatory behavior towards Blacks outside of school, surprisingly many said no, and that they had "good whites" in their neighborhoods. "Now, in 1987, a lot of Black people got white people as their

friends, and white people got Blacks as their friends." There were a few others who claimed that in their experience of the integrated school they attended, kids were treated equally by school personnel and peers within the school, but that Blacks and Hispanics were subjected to egregiously racist behavior by whites outside of school. One young Black woman reported, "The whites in this neighborhood are mean to Spanish and Blacks. They chase Puerto Ricans and Blacks out of the neighborhood. Today I was walking down the street and some white lady who cleans her front windows everyday shouted, "Beat it, negress!" as I walked past her house. I said, 'You too, honky.'" A white woman from the group analyzed it this way, "That's a white, lower class neighborhood and they're more into talking about their prejudice. You know even I don't feel safe -- you'll [be] running down the street and they'll [be] throwing bottles out the door, and so you run for home. You can't stop and look around."

AND YET THEY STAY, OR COME BACK, OR START AGAIN... THOUGHTS ABOUT RETURNING

The stories we've heard thus far are not pleasant. They are underscored with self-doubt, frustration, anger, racism, sexism, and often psychological, if not physical, abuse. Yet many of these young women choose to stay in school, or come back, or work towards their GED. Given their strong negative feelings about their school experience, how does one explain their perseverance? In pursuing our questions with the teens, at least part of the answer seems to lie with their disillusionment with life after

school. Their returning to school also reflects their beliefs about the significance of a GED or diploma on the job market. The diploma is a symbol for past and future accomplishments, as well as a vehicle to economic independence.

Life After School

For many of the teens, officially dropping out or unofficially staying out was fun -- for about the first six months. "I loved watching TV all day long. I would do some cleaning around the house, pick up my clothes, and maybe do a wash. I'd time everything, though, so I could watch stories. I had the TV schedule in my head. I didn't even have to look at the paper anymore." "We all played hooky and stayed over one person's house or we'd talk to [each other] all day [long] on the phone--it was great!" Gradually, however, for some the fun dissipated, "I'm just sitting around. Everybody's gone. I'm all by myself. People go to work and school. I was sick of school, but it wasn't really fun being out of school either." "After a while, I got tired of hanging out with my cousin every day. We did the same thing all the time and I was tired of the routine. I started missing school and my friends." Sometimes parents' attitudes began to infect their children's experiences: "My momma started giving me a really hard time and acting like she didn't care. She would say, 'If you ain't going to do nothing, then I'm not going to give you nothing.'" Concerns about getting older also began to set in, "When you watch people on TV and

they're making a lot of money and you're not, it makes you think, 'What's going to happen to me?'" "Once you're out there you realize that you don't have anything. You can't get a decent job to take care of you. It's not really worth dropping out."

Several women had left school because they were pregnant. They gave mixed reports about staying home with their child. "Men don't want to be bothered with you anymore because you have a baby. I lost all of my friends. So I was really lonely." "Getting pregnant and getting married ruined my life. The four walls drove me crazy." "Staying home with my kid really changed my life -- I began to have a purpose, a focus." There were also those women who had dropped out and then gotten pregnant. "I used to spend a lot of time with my boyfriend, then I got pregnant and dumped him. Then I spent a lot of time taking care of my baby -- I liked it. I decided to go back to school when I realized I couldn't read to him." A few women had dropped out to take full-time jobs. In our particular sample, no one lasted very long in their new positions, "I worked from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. and then came home to do whatever. I decided to quit the job because I was tired of working all them hours and getting up so early." "I took a job at minimum wage to try and help my mom pay for the care of my baby. I couldn't believe it, even with a whole two week's pay, I could barely buy more than diapers and bottles. That's when I decided to go back for my GED."

So while dropping out or being absent provided a respite from the complexities of school life, staying home and/or working

for minimum wage, or doing child-care within the home created new dilemmas for these youth. An added problem for this particular group of teens was the dissonance between being dissatisfied--at times disgusted -- with most aspects of their school life and wanting out, and concomitantly placing a high value on the diploma (or GED) itself. Both drop outs and non-drop outs rated the importance of getting a high school diploma, on a scale from 1-10, as a 10. In fact, out of 75 women, only two gave it less than a 10. Although our sample was skewed (see section on Focus Groups), these attitudes about getting a diploma were still extremely revealing.

The participants verbalized their beliefs that a diploma or a GED served multiple purposes. It was not only a key element in getting a <u>good</u> job, it was essential for getting <u>any</u> job. "Unless you want to work in a fast food joint all your life, you can't do nothing without your diploma." "My aunt just got her GED and before she did, she couldn't get a steady job. Now she works at the Merit Station. When my cousin went to apply for the same position, she didn't have her GED and they threw her application in the trash can."

One of the dissenters from this view, a white woman who had rated the importance of a diploma as a three, said quietly, "I think you're wrong. Most people who get diplomas are still not going to get out and get a good job." Her remarks met with strong disapproval. In one of the groups, a Black woman responded, "Even if you don't get a job you want, you'll be able to get

some job!" Another Hispanic woman said, "Even if it's hard to get a job, it's just better with a diploma. With a diploma, you have a little more choice, a better chance of getting what you want rather than what they can give you. (See Discussion Section.)

When we asked, "If neither a diploma nor a GED would help you get a good job, would you still rate its importance a 10?" To our amazement, about half of the group said, "yes." As we explored the issues further, we heard the women who were in school saying that completing all twelve years of school was considered an admirable accomplishment, particularly given the adversity of the process: "Although you don't like school, you keep coming. You realize you can't graduate until you pay your dues." The diploma also served as a marker denoting the end of an era -- particularly for youth who were not tracked as "college bound." "High school is something you started that you had better finish. Since there may be nothing else in your life that you finish, you can at least say you finished high school." For others, whose families included no prior high school graduates, it was a source of pride, "If I can get through, I'll be the first of ten to get a diploma. My mother would be so proud to see me walk down the aisle."

The teens participating in the GED program viewed their very return to an educational program as a personal victory. Although many of the in-school students did not value the equivalency as much as a diploma ("Employers are less likely to hire you because

they know it means you dropped out, and that you did not learn as much in one year as you should have going through four years of high school"), the GEDers believed it signifies an education achievement that would be held in similar esteem by employers and their families. Their GED was also a rite of passage which signalled a completion of previously unfinished business. A 19-year-old Black woman who had two kids, had just passed her GED, had a part-time job, and was planning to attend a community college in the Spring, described how triumphant she felt after passing her GED. "My mother said that the statistics show that Black girls who bear more than one kid by the time they're 18 and don't go back to school, rarely ever go back. They usually end up on welfare for the rest of their lives.... I was worried that would happen to me. I wanted to prove my mother and those statistics wrong. So far, I'm winning."

Employment and Future Visions

While many researchers (and people who are currently unemployed) would challenge the idea that a diploma is enough to get a good job (see Discussion Section), the notion of "good" and how these "good" jobs fit into the teens' images of their future needs to be examined more closely.

When we asked, "Do you ever think of what your life will be like at 25? If so, tell us what you imagine," all but three of the teens responded. These three said they never thought about it and didn't choose to now. The other women's responses fell

into four categories: those who saw themselves getting married, having an average of two kids, living in a big house, and having a good job; those who imagined they would be single but have a steady boyfriend, have at least one kid, a house, and a good job; those who wanted no primary attachments, at least one kid, an apartment and a good job; and those who wanted no primary attachments, no kids, a nice apartment, lots of clothes, a lot of dates, and a high-paying job.

While we tried to exhibit no preference for any of the responses, many of the teens were surprised by those of their peers who expected or desired not to live with a primary attachment. While "being married" was the most frequent status the teens envisioned for themselves, not being married in combination with a live-in boyfriend raised little controversy. The biggest blasphemy, however, seemed to be not wanting to have children. "They're so cute, and your life will be so empty without them, particularly when you're older." The women who didn't want children chose not to respond.

As we heard the women talk repeatedly about "good jobs," we began to ask what kinds of "good jobs" they would like to have. Most of them fell into blue and pink collar categories. The jobs most frequently mentioned were secretaries, receptionists, and cosmetologists. The second grouping of "good jobs" consisted of beauticians, computer programmers, nurses, armed services, counselors, and house cleaners. Other jobs that were labelled "good" but were not their particular job aspirations included

teachers, doctors, dentists, salespeople, and paralegals. When we then asked what the good jobs for men were, they identified a list of blue collar jobs, few of which overlapped with the jobs on their own lists. The male list included electronics technicians, carpenters, construction workers, guards, engineers, welders, garbage men, cab drivers, plumbers, photographers, doctors, and lawyers. When we asked why the lists were so different, the responses vacillated between "Girls don't want those kinds of jobs," and "No reason." When we asked whether girls were capable of handling those jobs, there was a resounding "YES" in each of the groups. They acted as if the oversight was accidental.

High School Diplomas: Differentially Important for Females and Males?

We were interested in the young women's opinions about the relative importance of a diploma (or GED) for males and females. While many said it was equally important for both sexes, since "everybody needs to work to feed their families," there was a clear constituency that advocated in favor of women. Their argument seemed to be threefold: First -- that men can often get legal or illegal jobs without a diploma, whereas women are not often "hired" for those same positions. Second -- although men help create families, they often don't share financial responsibility for them. This leaves women having to shoulder a heavier economic load and increases their need for a well-paying job, an option that can only be obtained by having a diploma.

Third -- regardless of men's abilities to support their families, women need to be financially independent and secure in the knowledge that they can support themselves. Given the tumultuous world of relationships, women need to know they can stay or leave based on their desires rather than their economic dependence.

Some of the women identified the high rates of divorce as the rationale behind the latter argument. "I don't think any woman should be dependent on any man because the divorce rates are so high. A woman has to have a good education and a good job to be able to take care of herself." Another woman added, "Girl, you can't depend on anyone else. You got to live like you're gonna have to take care of yourself. Sooner or later, you're going to be out there on your own."

Many women blamed the second argument, women's disproportionate responsibility for the economic well being of their families, on the high rates of unemployment, particularly striking for Black and Hispanic men. One Black woman commented, "It's not that they don't want to work, but it's usually Black men that don't have any jobs, and there's nothing sorrier than seeing a Black man hanging on the corner with nothing to do." Other women, particularly women who were already mothers, saw the problem as cultural rather than structural, "You rarely see a guy taking care of his baby. Like this guy in my English class. He was talking to the other guys and said, 'My girl, we got her pregnant.' But then he told her mother, 'It's not my baby.'" Many women felt that men were just not dependable, "Boys are

lazy. If they make money, they are slick. They lie to their woman and say, 'but I only got this much,' and then they keep the other half."

TEEN WOMEN'S RECOMMENDATIONS

What School Should Be

We asked the women in each of the groups to divide into smaller groups of three or four and respond to the following questions: "If you could create a school that you would want to go to, where you would get up in the morning and feel excited about going to school, what would it be like? What and how would you learn? How would your teachers, counselors, principals, parents, and male peers relate to you? How would you relate to them?" Many responded enthusiastically to the task, some found it difficult to even fantasize such possibilities. One small group, which consisted of women who had dropped out, described their ideal school in the following ways:

> We would like to have the five basic subjects and electives which included computers, business, nursing, cooking, and auto body shop. We would like to have small classes because you can learn and hear better, and if we want to talk in class, we won't be embarrassed. We feel as though gym shouldn't be like an everyday thing and considered like one of our other subjects. Like you might need math when you get out of school, but we don't see where you're going to need to know how to run around the track. No employer is going to say, "Let's see you do a monkey hang."
>
> We would learn by listening and consuming everything. School would be fun. Our teachers would be excited and lively, not bored. They would act caring and take time to understand how students feel and try to teach them--

> really making an effort before going on to another thing. They would present class work and then take time to talk to kids individually. We would pay them well so they would do a better job. Our guidance counselors would treat us equal and with respect. They would be there when a problem arises, being helpful, and giving out choices when there's something to decide like if you want a job or want to go to college. Principals would act like they care about each individual student. They would be clear about what is right and wrong and treat students equally.
>
> Our parents would tell us they love and care about us, and we'd say thank-you for what you've given us. They would be firm and helpful at the same time. You know how some parents are firm, but not helpful. They cuss and holler, this and that, you better go to school but they don't never try to sit down and try to help you with what you don't know. Or if they can't help you, try to help you to get help or go up to the school and find out about the problem. They would make sure the teachers are doing the job they're supposed to.
>
> Boys would treat us with respect. They wouldn't do the usual waiting down at the end of the hall, calling on you, flippin' their eyes, and looking at you from the back if they think you're cute. They'd look you in the eyes and ask you out and try to get to know you -- not the stuff from behind. If they run by and grab your tits, they would get into trouble. And they wouldn't go around touching on people's butts.
>
> How would we relate to teachers, counselors, principals, parents, and boys? We would treat them the same way they treated us -- with respect.

Other small group visions contained similar themes: relevant courses; smaller classrooms; caring, interesting, and interested teachers; helpful counselors; fair principals, loving and supportive parents who helped with problem-solving and advocacy when needed. They also wanted males who would treat them like friends and cherished lovers, rather than sexual objects. Perhaps the most prominent theme that ran through all the women's ideal schools was the desire for respect and positive attention-

- so they felt listened to, taken seriously, and cared about. This appears to be a simple request on the surface, yet perhaps the most difficult to realize.

Some of the specifics mentioned by other groups included courses and teachers that would allow them to talk about and make sense of the often confusing realities of their lives like drugs, disease, sex, and violence ("My aunt just shot my uncle, why is that?"). One young woman volunteered that there should be a course that allows them to watch their "stories" which they would then discuss so they could play and learn at the same time. Other courses mentioned were Black history, chemistry, drama and singing, dance, family planning, and sex education ("but not as part of hygiene"). One group mentioned instituting small work groups composed of five to eight people so they could "get to know people, have more time to talk, and learn on their own levels." Another group discussed having input into the teachers who were hired. "We would find good teachers by testing them out, and seeing how well they teach us, give us attention, and treat us with respect."

In relation to parents, teens had high expectations. One group espoused the following idea, "Parents are responsible for what we become. They should come to school and see what their kids are doing." Another group suggested, "They shouldn't pressure us, but they should make sure we're doing our homework and not goofing up. They should be there when we need them." Some other group expressed the opinion, "Parents should have more

time for us than they do for themselves because they have been out there longer and could tell us if we're making mistakes.... We need them to tell us right then the answers to our questions, not wait till it blows up in our faces."

Three of the seven groups suggested having some gender separate classes or gender separate schools as a way to enhance their education. "We should separate boys from girls, we'd get a better education out of the deal. Boys distract girls a lot." Along similar lines, a few women suggested that everyone be required to wear uniforms. Their rationale was to try and reduce the intense competition around owning the "right" clothes and jewelry, so those who couldn't afford to compete would not be ostracized or feel inadequate.

Student Recommendations

Besides having the women participants construct their versions of a school that would be more conducive to their needs and interests, we wanted to get their opinions about two issues that are currently on the policy agenda of most schools--holding more students back when they are unsuccessful at mastering certain grade-specific materials and refusing high school diplomas for students who fail "exit examinations" at the end of twelfth grade.

In relation to the former, since we heard the teens speak of the devastating effects of being held back -- the embarrassment, the sense of failure, the loss in self-esteem -- we assumed they

would denounce the practice and demand alternatives for students who had fallen behind. To our amazement, about two-thirds or fifty participants supported students being held back when the courses failed were basic subjects (not including gym, art, music). But, of course, the issue was much more complicated than we anticipated as we began to unravel it.

The minority voices talked about students' academic difficulties being located with the teacher, "People flunk because teachers don't explain things to students in the way they can understand it. Students shouldn't be penalized for that." They also felt that there were certain resources that students should have access to before they were left back. "Kids should have private tutoring when they have problems, and be encouraged to catch up. The school should offer it at times that are convenient for students, not just at lunch when kids need to eat, or late after school when some kids have jobs." One student described how receiving special attention in a particular problematic area, rather than repeating the whole grade provided a viable option for her family member. She offered, "My sister had a problem with reading but she was doing o.k. in most of her other classes. So they let her stay in the right grade for her age and put her in a special reading class to get her reading level up to where it should be. I think that's good because if they held her back, she'd be bored with her other subjects and she'd be ashamed and embarrassed." A few of the women also mentioned that they experienced being held back as punishment

which reinforced their adversarial role with their teachers. "I know my teacher held me back as revenge. I had all As, Bs, and Cs in science and I got into a fight with my teacher and cussed her out. She threatened to hold me back and I didn't believe her. She won."

The majority opinion had several major factions. One group concurred with the aforementioned belief that students should receive individual tutoring when doing poorly and should not be held back in response to failing only one subject area. However, they believed that students should not be allowed to pass onto the next grade if they were missing basic information that served as the basis for future learning. "You have to know certain things before you go on. You have to learn how to read and write and do basic math or you're going to be sitting in the next grade and realize you don't understand anything that's going on." They acknowledged that being held back was often experienced as punishment and also led to students dropping out. Concomitantly, they believed that being passed on without learning anything was a disservice to the students as well. One young Black woman told a story about her uncle who had gone through twelve years of high school and was essentially illiterate. She described him as a talented man, an incredibly skilled mechanic. He concealed his illiteracy at work by taking his customers written instructions home. He had her or her mother read them to him. "That was a

crime! He should have been held back at some point and taught to read. If he had been, he could have been a successful business-man today!"

A second group held the students accountable. "If kids are sitting around and not doing their work, and they don't pass, it's on them." One woman commented, "What makes you think that they are going to do their work in a higher grade if they aren't doing their work in the grade they're in?" Additionally, some thought that staying back would give students the motivation they needed to take school seriously. One woman, reflecting on her own experience said, "It was a mistake for me to get passed on. I was being lazy and I figured I'd get by, so I stopped coming."

Another group of women said that teachers who passed students on to the next grade when they had not acquired the skills they needed to begin the next level of work were setting students up to fail. They experienced it as a lack of caring on the teacher's part, "If you're on to something you don't know how to do, you'll be really embarrassed. Teachers should help you avoid embarrassing situations, not throw you into them."

We also found a similar split in relation to the concept of exit exams. Although most of the women thought that exit exams would increase the number of high school drop outs, the majority would vote for its implementation. Two beliefs seemed to fuel their position. One was the idea that the exam demonstrated to the students that they had really earned their degree and they had mastery over certain subject matter. "At least I'll know

that I can read and write. A lot of teachers pass kids to get rid of them even if they can't read a book. I knew some boy who graduated and couldn't even spell words like cat. I think that's wrong." "At least you know you're not being passed along because your teacher was lazy." "If you can't pass the test, you have a diploma that means nothing." The other underlying belief was that it seemed to symbolize a student's readiness to join the outside world. "I wanna be a nurse. At least now I know some biology." "If you can pass the exam, at least you know you can get by in your everyday life. You can go into the store and know if they're ripping you off, or read and be able to spell on applications when you're applying for a job."

Some, however, felt the exam was unnecessary. Some thought students had passed enough tests by the time they had become seniors. Others felt it wasn't fair to get through twelve years and then not get a diploma if you couldn't pass the exam. "Lots of people freeze up and get really nervous on tests, particularly on ones that are so important." A small group were of the opinion that exit exams were yet another form of punishment for students who were not academically inclined. They believed that the teachers were more to blame than the students, yet it was the students being penalized. One woman offered an interesting option. "You should take the test early in the twelfth grade, not at the end. Those who can't pass at the beginning of the year should have more help and individual tutoring to learn the material. That way it's more likely that at the end of the year,

they'll be able to pass." Another suggested, "It should be like a driver's test. You take it any time during the year when you feel ready. Once you've passed, you're set and you just need to finish your course work. If you don't pass you go home, study, and try again until you pass."

FINAL COMMENTS

As our interview with each of the groups came to a close, we asked the women in the group whether they had any closing or additional words of advice for us, and the educators, social scientists and others who might read this report. Some of their comments are listed here:

To the School Board

"You should think about putting daycare centers in school. There are many young women with babies who need child care in order to attend school."

"You should encourage more adults to come back to school to finish their diploma. It's really inspiring when you see adults sitting in classes with young people after all these years."

"You should have students wear uniforms around the school so everybody's wearing the same thing."

To Principals

"Have a friendly attitude and act like you care about each of the students. Watch out for them. Sit down and ask them what

they're going through and what's the problem."

To Teachers

"Be more caring."

"Listen."

"Have drop outs come into the classroom and tell what it's like after a few months of being out. That might have made a difference to me when I was thinking of dropping out."

"Sit down with students who are having learning difficulties and help find ways for them to learn."

To Other Students

"If you're having problems at school, go talk to somebody about it. If that doesn't work, find somebody else. Don't give up."

"Don't be a fool! Don't drop out. It's not worth it."

DISCUSSION

In listening to the voices of these young, mostly working class, Black, white, and Hispanic women, one begins to hear a complex tale reflecting a set of perceptions, interpretations, and contradictions that have often been ignored. It is especially important that one hear the stories they present to make meaning of their lives, and to turn temporarily from the din produced by the explanations that their teachers, principals, parents, and even more "academically successful" students are quick to offer.

The teens' descriptions of their educational experiences revealed multiple levels of analyses, as follows:

1. Intrapersonal. For many young women, the explanations for dropping out were located within themselves. Some considered themselves cognitively and/or intellectually deficient; others saw their problem as one of laziness or lack of motivation; some had low self-esteem; and some simply were bored or frustrated with school and preferred to spend their time outside of school.

2. Interpersonal. Some women emphasized relational conflicts between themselves and teachers, principals, parents, and/or other students. Others felt alienated by the lack of meaningful social interactions in school and complained about inadequate counseling.

3. Group. Some women had overwhelming family demands that took priority over staying in school. Others felt lost as students within overly large classes. Still others were in-

fluenced by peer group norms that discouraged high academic performance.

4. Systematic. Many of those interviewed pointed to perceived inequities in the educational system as the basis for their leaving or being asked to leave. They described a variety of systemic issues which reflect the unequal power relations between students and school personnel[11] such as: the teachers' lack of accountability to students, the de-legitimization of students' criticisms, and an absence of mechanisms that would allow students and teachers to negotiate differences between them. Other issues were symptomatic of the social reproduction of the society's economic and racial practices.[12] The teens complained about the visible consequences of unequal and inadequate distribution of resources within the school system; i.e., overcrowded classrooms; high student-teacher and student-guidance counselor ratios; over-used materials and insufficient supplies and equipment. They also outlined incidences of racial discrimination -- differentially negative treatment towards Black and Hispanic students by some teachers.

In their own self-understanding of the sources of their decisions and non-decisions about dropping out, the women interviewed placed differing weights on the importance of racial, class, and gender factors. Although race and class differences within and between the focus groups contributed to some variations in their responses, overall the women more frequently cited racial factors rather than gender or class in their decisions to

leave school. It would be an overstatement to say that the women in the group were fully cognizant of the ways in which racism manifested itself or that they understood all the multifacets of white privilege and the insidiousness of internalized oppression. Nonetheless, for several of the Black and Hispanic women in the group, racial discrimination was clearly a causal factor in their leaving. While only one white woman left school because she felt discriminated against as a white, a majority of the white women related stories in which whites (and Asians) received preferential treatment, and where students of color were more likely to be expelled or to leave.

In the case of gender, the women frequently reported various ways in which their sex had an impact on them both within and outside of school. They could identify certain ways in which they were disadvantaged or treated disrespectfully because of their gender. In addition, they felt that they would need greater credentials, i.e., at least a high school diploma, to obtain jobs that lesser-qualified males could get. Pregnant and parenting teens in particular described the added burdens of shouldering the ultimate responsibility for the emotional and material well-being of their children.

However, most of the young women remained somewhat myopic when it came to seeing their personal situations as part of the problems of female teens as a whole and the overall sexism which permeates the society. No one -- except pregnant or parenting teens -- directly linked their gender with their academic

performance or decisions about staying in school or not. For instance, no one declared, "I was sick of the way I as a woman was being treated, so I left!" For example, most of the pressures that made it difficult for them to remain in school stemmed from the enormous task of managing various female roles.[13] In school, teachers expect young women to be smart but boys, from whom they want acceptance, are threatened when they show it. These boys also require them to be virginal yet sexually available girlfriends. At home, these women feel the pressures of being responsible, caring, and celibate daughters and sisters; and for some, financially independent, and yet full-time, mothers. With families and boyfriends, and school all competing for top priority, it's no wonder these young women feel the emotional toll of being pulled in all directions.

Perhaps their inability to identify the primacy of gender within the myriad of conflicting expectations lies in the socially reinforced tendency to view roles compartmentally, seeing them as separate and distinct entities, rather than elements of a seamless whole. These separations serve to obfuscate the patterned set of obligations and inconsistent demands that are placed on women. This compartmentalization process in the context of a patriarchal society absolves individuals, organizations, and institutions from responding to and/or accommodating these competing expectations. Since there is little institutional support for women to untangle, question, or process their experiences inside or outside of schools, their

ability to gain a perspective on the impact of gender is stymied. Consequently, these women fail to see the interrelationships among the themes which serve to organize their lives. Their vision becomes even more distorted when the educational systems where these women are legally confined for the first 16 years of their lives profess gender neutrality. Thus, in a society where sexism is often masked as normal, the complexity of being female is relegated to the background, and attention is distracted by an approach that focuses narrowly on the individual.

While these women presented the image of school as a painful, even destructive place to be, there were a number of forces at play which drew them back to school or an equivalency program. Many seemed to return by default because few viable academic, social, or vocational alternatives existed for them outside of the public school context. Concerned about their present financial responsibilities and fearful about their future employment options, many came back out with the belief, accurate or not, that a diploma would guarantee their future prosperity. Their decisions to return were also strengthened by the symbolism of a diploma as a marker of transition from adolescence to adulthood, and from school into the world of work.

It is important to remember, however, that even if the women in these groups are committed to getting their high school or equivalency diplomas, they remain at risk, on the periphery of the academic world. Those still in school take pride in the fact that they had never officially dropped out, but their inordinate

number of absences makes them vulnerable and casts their "success" in doubt. Although those who have enrolled in equivalency programs have taken a step most female drop outs do not take,[14] passing the exam will still be an arduous task for them. What have these women told us about the kind of educational experiences that they would best profit from? In relation to the classroom and the school environment, there are several important messages that stand out:

Classes need to be smaller than they currently are -- having closer to 20 rather than 40 students. Classroom size appears to be a major determinant for whether young women will participate in class discussions. The larger the class, the more likely it is that women will remain silent and experience feelings of isolation and exclusion. These feelings often reinforce a sense of powerlessness and low self-esteem. While such passive behavior may be convenient for teachers trying to manage oversized classrooms, this situation contributes to the likelihood of dropping out.

Smaller work groups would be an effective technique for providing young women with safer, more interactive moments within the classroom experience. It would enable them to speak more frequently, get to know a small group of peers well, and have the experience of working cooperatively.

Quality relationships with and receiving individual attention from teachers as well as principals and counselors is a central, rather than peripheral, factor for female students to

stay engaged in the educational process. Feeling liked and cared for, particularly by the teachers, seemed to affect students' sense of self, their sense of belonging in the classroom, and their interest in the course content. Further, for those who were caught in a cycle of cutting or were contemplating dropping out, it was the personal contact with teachers, counselors, principals, and parents that often made the difference in their choice to come back. The failure of school personnel to contact students who had been repeatedly absent confirmed the students' feelings of insignificance.

Dialogue between young women and teachers as well as other school personnel about the aspects of school that are particularly rewarding or problematic need to be incorporated in an ongoing way. In addition, less-adversarial mechanisms by which students and teachers can negotiate their differences, before they have escalated to serious problems, need to be established. These young women can offer an abundance of information about what works for them and what they need. Their lament is that few adults bother to ask. In fact, one of the alarming results of our research was the consistency with which these young women said that no one had previously inquired about their experiences in school. Being heard and then having avenues to individually or collectively negotiate problem areas would serve several functions. It would legitimize their right to critique their educational experience. In addition, it would begin to demystify the unequal power relations between students, especially female

students, and teachers. Finally, it would teach more effective strategies for conflict resolution.

Young women need some assistance in envisioning and practicing alternative ways of relating to their peers -- both male and female, and managing the pressures to conform. While needs for acceptance and belonging are particularly strong during adolescence, for some young women, their inability to meet the social or material expectations is a compelling force in their dropping out. Cutting classes becomes easy. If students could discuss openly the polar tensions of inclusions and exclusions, intimacy and separation, leader and follower, they might be better equipped to deal with the difficult pressures of being part of the "group." In addition, many women complain about their being viewed as sexual objects in their interactions with boys. The pressure on many women to be attractive, flirtatious, and sexually active is, at best, a distraction and, at worst, an all-consuming obsession. While it is inevitable and appropriate for adolescent women to begin to explore their sexuality, female students need to be provided with an understanding of the pulls they experience and with strategies that offer new responses to sexist and sexual relationships with boys.

Teachers and students need to be sensitized to the feelings and special needs of pregnant and parenting teens. An overwhelming majority of the pregnant teens and teen mothers we interviewed felt disparaged by the negative judgments their teachers and peers both directly and indirectly expressed about their

pregnancy. Teachers and other school personnel may have bad feelings about teen pregnancy or frown on adolescent sexuality. They may believe that a student's pregnancy will complicate or even ruin her life. Peers, on the other hand, may approve and even engage in sex themselves, but view "getting caught" as irresponsible or stupid. Whatever the range of feelings adults and students have about this socially charged issue, they need to recognize that conveying those feelings to pregnant teens contributed to the teens feeling embarrassed, ashamed, afraid, and unwelcome. It also may leave the teens feeling abandoned at a time in which they are in need of more support, guidance, or direction. Discounted, these teens leave school, often never to return. Thus the prophecy of failure for teen mothers is ensured.

Endnotes

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2. M. Fine, "The Social Context and a Sense of Injustice: The Option to Challenge," Representative Research in Social Psychology (1983): 257-272.

3. PEER, The Heart of Excellence: Equal Opportunities and Educational Reform 6 (Fall 1987): 3; M. Fine, "The Social Context."

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10. M. Sadker and D. Sadker, "Exploding Zepezauer's Mini Minefield," Phi Delta Kappan 62 (December 1981): 272-273.

11. S. Bowles and H. Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America (New York, N.Y. : Basic Books, 1976); H. Giroux, Theory and Resistance: A Pedagogy for the Opposition (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey Publications, 1983).

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13. M. Fine and M. Foster, Keeping Girls in School: a Handbook for Teachers and Counselors, (Washington, D.C.: PEER of NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, 1988).

14. Kolstad and Owings, 1986, High School Dropouts.

APPENDIX

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A DROP OUT?
THREE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STORIES

PEER posed the question above to the participants in the focus groups. The personal stories for three of the participants of how it felt to drop out are reprinted below. What you will find revealed in very clear tones, are the same themes of isolation and confusion, and yet some sense of hope upon reentry into an educational program. These stories by the young women themselves, reprinted as written, are truly in their own voices...

Autobiography 1

My school days weren't like an average school day. I would get up in the morning, get a shower and walk to the bus stop to meet my friend, Kelly. We would get high before we got on the bus. When we got to school, we walked down the corner to the alley and got high. We stayed there till second period, sometimes third. We'd go in school to study hall. We had lunch together; so we just munched. Then we went to the third floor bathroom and got high. We always went to fifth period (don't ask me why). We had sixth period together; so after it was over we would go to our lockers, get our stuff and leave to get high. We

did this mostly every day except if one of us were absent or if we didn't have enough weed for the day.

We were having fun until March 13, 1987, when we got caught after lunch getting high in the third floor bathroom. That day I will remember for a long time. I remember everything that happened that day. The thing I remember the most is sitting in the Dean's office "high as a kite." He's about 6 feet tall, he looks like a bull dog, and he's fat. He used to walk around school thinking he was a "bad guy." I think everyone hated him. He didn't like me too much because of when my sister went there. He hated her; he told me one day that I reminded him of her.

When I was sitting in the Dean's office the day I got caught, he was asking me what I was smoking, where I got it, and how I got it. All I did was sit there looking out the window. He got mad, because I wasn't answering him, so he grabbed all my personal stuff and put it all over his desk. He started reading all my letters. He would just glare at me. That's when I started to laugh, because I was high. That got him mad. He started telling me that Kelly told him everything (she went in before me), but I didn't believe him. I just said no she didn't. He told me he was going to call my dad. I told him to call my mom (that's when her and me [sic] got along). As soon as he picked up the phone, I started to get nervous. He told my mom she had to come and pick me up and that I was caught smoking pot in the bathroom. He told me to wait outside his office for my mom. I was sitting there when the bell rang to change for class. Everybody I know started to come up to me to talk to me. Then

some kid Shane came up to me and started talking to me. I told him what happened, and all he could say was, "Are you still going to the prom with me?" (He was so dippy). Then I saw my mom walking down the hallway. She looked so mad. The Dean came out of his office and told my mom what happened. She told me she called my dad. All my mom could say was, "Why couldn't you wait till after school?" When we got back home my dad came over and took me out to dinner to talk. I thought I was going to get killed, but it was pretty cool. I only stayed in for a weekend as punishment (I got kicked out on a Friday); so it wasn't too bad.

When I got kicked out of school it changed my life a lot. I don't know if it's a good or bad change. I'm the same person but my attitude has changed a lot. When I was in school my life was pretty much together. I always knew what I was going to be doing. My home life was pretty cool, although me [sic] and my brother didn't get along (and we still don't) but me [sic] and my mom got along great. She could understand me sometimes. Now I can't even be in the same room as her. My relationship with my mom is worse now, because when I was younger she was always working and going out and I was coming and going when I wanted to. My dad was never there because he didn't live there. I guess you can say I'm pretty independent. My mom never really told me what to do when I was younger. Now, since her heart attack, she thinks she can run my life. It gets me mad when she tells me what to do. I feel like saying, "Shut up, don't start telling me what to do now," but I don't cause I respect her to a

point. Maybe I'm wrong for feeling this way, but I can't help the way I feel. It's the same way with my dad. I don't feel close enough to him to talk about my feelings. I can't remember him living at home. I remember seeing him on Sundays. I would like to be closer to my dad, but something tells me not to. I guess I'm scared--I don't know. With my mom I'm not scared, I just don't like talking to her. She doesn't make any sense. If I tell her something, she immediately starts telling me what to do and how to do it. The only time she didn't try to make me do what she wanted is when I decided to come to CORA.

I just feel like getting away from it all. Maybe that's the reason I get high so much. I like the feeling of being high. When you're high you don't think of the stuff that depresses you. When you're high, you don't take anything seriously, that's why I don't take anything seriously. I guess you can say I use drugs as a crutch, but that's not going to make me stop. I've been smoking pot for four or five years (since I was 11). I don't want to stop. I know drugs mess you up a lot, but you only live once. I'm not into a lot of drugs, just the ones that get me by. It's hard to explain about why I do drugs. The more I think about drugs the more I realize I'm not going to quit. I think I'm addicted to smoking pot, cause when I don't get high for awhile I become cranky and the littlest things bother me. I don't want to stop, they keep me going.

After I got kicked out of school I tried to get into a public school, Northeast or Frankford, but I couldn't get in because they weren't in my district. I was going to go back to

school, but I would have to wait till September and repeat 10th grade; so I didn't go back. I didn't go to school for two months. In that time I didn't do that much. I would wait for my friend Patti to come home from school, and either go out or watch my soaps. Then Patti was telling me about CORA.[1] I told my mom and dad about it. My mom told me to do what I wanted; my dad was against it. It was my decision, and I made the right one.

I started CORA on June 22, 1987. I didn't think it was going to be like it is. I thought it was going to be like regular school, but it had a whole different atmosphere. The people here are easy to get along with. They are way better than the teachers in high school. They try to teach me the way to be a good person and to make something out of my life, but I'm just a stubborn person. I always want to do it my way. I know how my future will be if I keep this up but, for some reason, I can't seem to do anything about it. I could if I wanted to, but right now I just want to party and live my life doing the things I won't have a chance to do later.

I haven't decided what my career goal is yet. I want to do a lot of things. Writing this essay has made me think a lot about journalism; so has Carol, the job developer at CORA. It seems like it would be interesting. If I decided to get into journalism, I would like to be a reporter for a magazine. It would be cool reporting about famous people and meeting them. My other career goal is to be a hotel manager. I'm starting to lose

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[1] CORA's Neumann program is a GED program located in Philadelphia.

interest in it, since I've been thinking about journalism. I don't know much about it but I believe I could do the job. I might be doing it 10 years from now, who knows? Hopefully my life will be pretty much together by then. I will have to see what schooling it will take, then decide when to go. But first, I have to see if that's what I want to do. I guess I'm just confused right now; I don't know what I want.

To conclude my essay--my life now is all right; I get by. This last year has been the most confusing for me. I had to make a lot of decisions, some weren't too good--some were. I've also had a lot of pressure from my mom and dad. That's why we aren't as close anymore. They keep telling me to go meet people from other places, cause they don't like me hanging on the streets all the time. It's the way I was all my life.... I like hanging around with my friends and partying. I'm not changing my life for anybody. I'm going to do what I want to do; what's right for me.

Autobiography 2

I'm 19 years old and I was a high school drop-out. First I would like to explain to you why I'm writing this. Its (sic) not because I want you to have my name in a book somewhere. I'm writing this because I care.

Education is very important in order to make it in this world these days, especially for women. We have to try ten times harder than men, so please read what I'm writing. Don't just

look at it and say, "I'll make it even without an education," because you won't.

I guess the reason I dropped out of high school was mainly because everyone else was doing it and no one seemed to care either way. I'd go to school in the morning, go to one or two classes and cut the rest of the day; this started in middle school. I made it through middle school by the skin of my teeth; but hey, I didn't need an education, so I thought. It was now time to take on high school -- a different school, new classes, new kids and in a new city. I told myself that I was really going to try and I did for the first week until I made some friends and started cutting classes. Everyday it was cutting yet another class until I was only there for homeroom. But, believe it or not, I was passing all my classes. I don't know how, because I never did my homework, and only took one or two major tests. The truth of it was my teachers didn't care if I was there or not. After a while my friends dropped out and I was there alone. I started going again and I was doing good until a boy started bothering me to go out with him. When I refused he broke a glass bottle in front of my face, and I got a few pieces in my eyes. When I went to a teacher he said there was nothing he could do for me because he didn't see what happened. So I went to my counselor and she sent me on my way. I called my mom to come get me; she did and we went to the principal and, of course, he did nothing. So I tried it for a few more days and the guy kept bothering me so I just stopped going. No one noticed I wasn't there.

When I dropped out I got a job as a cashier which only paid $3.30 an hour. This was okay with me because I was the only one I had to worry about. I had a lot of time for myself so I spent most of my time with my ex-boyfriend whom I finally grew tired of. About two months after we broke up I found out I was pregnant. I had the baby and lived with my mom. She took care of me and the baby by working two jobs, day and night. After about six months I tried getting another job and the only work I could find was being a cashier or working in a fast food joint making only $3.35 an hour. Believe me, that wasn't enough to buy pampers, formula, baby clothes, baby food, and clothe myself.

One morning I woke up and went to cash my pay check. I looked at it for a few minutes, put it back on the kitchen table, picked up the telephone and called the CORA Neumann Program where I enrolled so I could get my GED and make a better life for my son and myself. I thought to myself, in years to come my son may come to me and say he wants to drop out of high school and who would I be to say no (if I did nothing to get my high school diploma).

Maybe I did go back to get my GED for reasons other than my own feelings, but how can I believe in other people if I couldn't even believe in myself? Like I said in the beginning, girls must try harder than boys because not only must we prove ourselves to others, but, more importantly, we must prove to ourselves that we can do anything we want and be anything we want to be. We first have to work hard and make it through high school and that, my friends, is the biggest and most important step of all. You may

run into a few teachers along the way who may not care; but for every one teacher you find there who doesn't care, there are ten more who do. Don't throw your life away because of that one teacher, keep on trying and find the ten who do. Even if you do decide that high school is not for you, there are many other GED programs that can help you receive yours, and get you on your way to a better job and an easier life.

Autobiography 3

In response to one Sneaker Mother who said:

> Be ready for responsibility and independence because it's something every woman and girl has to go through alone. And I think that once you have a baby you might as well get ready for a life, your life and someone else's life. You have to try to make a good life for both and to do that, no games and not too much fun, you have to be fully prepared to take care. It slows a young person down a hell of a lot.[2]

The strongest feeling I felt was loss -- like my life was over. I remember thinking I could never finish high school let alone attend Howard University in Washington, D.C. All I knew about raising a child seemed to suggest that it was a full time job which rarely left time for anything else. I was 16 and in the 11th grade, and I felt cheated, as if someone besides myself had done this to me.

It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be to conceal the pregnancy. I continued to play contact sports and to attend the Christian camp which I had been attending for a few years.

2-8 T. Williams and W. Kornblum, Growning Up Poor, New York: Lexington, 1985, pp. 83-95.

During this time I felt dazed and afraid to tell anyone what was happening inside my body. If I felt sick, I would excuse myself quickly and go to the bathroom. I even pretended to get my period by making sure the Stay Free box dwindled as quickly as it normally would have. Some of my fear was because of my mother and our religious background. We were Christians and had been preached at about fornication and adultery for as long as I could remember. However, I'm not quite sure what I thought my mother would do if she found out.

> In most cases the parents are very despondent about their daughter's pregnancy. By the time they find out about it, it is usually too late to do anything but anticipate having a grandchild. This prospect is generally shocking and disappointing, but eventually, if family resources allow, the grandchild is welcome.[3]

More ironic is the fact that I didn't know what being pregnant really meant. I knew as I lay in my bed late at night that something was causing a tightness in my stomach, just as I knew that I wasn't moving as freely as I normally would. But I didn't know why this thing wouldn't go away when I pounded against my stomach, and I couldn't figure out how it would finally exit my body after full term.

> ... the sequence of events is usually pregnancy first, birth control second. Since most teenage mothers do not intend to become pregnant, their initial reaction to pregnancy is shock and depression.... In some cases, however, there is a long period of denial -- especially among very young mothers who have just begun to menstruate.[4]

It was almost seven months before my mother found out. She cried for days afterward while I built a haven in my bedroom away from the commotion.

> Pregnant teenagers do not immediately share their feelings with their parents... only after a month or so do they tell their parents.... Their daughters are afraid to tell them, and the girls' fear is usually justified by their parents' reactions to the news....[5]

I remember telling her that I would give the baby up for adoption. Then someone informed her that it really wasn't my decision to make -- that she was in control of my body and anything that came out of it until I turned 21 years old. She exerted her power, and I had a child at the age of 16. The decision hurt almost as much as being pregnant. I couldn't help but think that if she had told me what to expect, then, perhaps, I could have prevented the mess that I was in. I didn't know about birth control and that there was nothing you could do (short of miscarriage and abortion) to get the monthly blood flowing again.

> In nine months she makes the transition from childhood to adulthood. Her life is transformed. Gone are the adolescent pleasures of going to the movies, partying, spending money on snacks and clothes. Now she is responsible for preparing formulas, feeding her always hungry infant, and taking care of it almost all the time -- instant maturity.[6]

My mother was very supportive, though, especially during a time when a lot of teenage women were getting pregnant and put out of their homes (there was a high baby boom). We also had a day care center at my high school to accommodate the teenage mothers. I graduated a year early, never played basketball or softball again, couldn't participate in the commencement services the following year, and lost a lot of friends who were connected to the Church. But I guess you can say that I made out all right.

When I think about teenage mothers, I still get the same tightness in my stomach and I can't help but wonder what the hell are they thinking about. I don't have positive feelings about teenage pregnancies because I haven't seen a lot of teenage mothers go back to school, get good jobs, or go on to college. Instead, what I've seen is welfare lines filled with young women and little snotty nosed kids clinging to them.

> The most serious problem facing young mothers is not so much how to get into the labor force as how to get sufficient education and/or training to enter the labor force at a salary high enough to support the mother and her child and pay for child care as well.[7]

I've seen young kids get pregnant in order to grow up, thinking they can keep their 15 year old boyfriends. I feel a strong sense of sadness because not a lot of young Black women have the support networks that they need to get by in our society, let alone in Philadelphia. My hope is that most of them can find alternatives to pregnancy, and, if not, then find real people who care about them enough to make the path easier.

I'm not quite sure how to put this into a theoretical framework except to say that an enormously alarming percentage of teenage boys and girls are becoming parents. Unfortunately these same children have little more than the social welfare system to assist them in the care and nurturance (sic) of their offspring.

> Staying in school is only one of the major problems facing teenage mothers. Even more pressing is the question of how to make a living. Although most of the young mothers have a work history (that is, 75 percent have worked at either a part-time or summer job), eight out of ten are dependent on public assistance for their support. Often the welfare check alone is insufficient to cover expenses.[8]

Also alarming are the negative effects which come with welfare. Poor parents often have inadequate support systems, live in poverty stricken neighborhoods, and their children, more often than not, attend the worst of public schools. As a result, a lot of our Black children are being shortchanged and perhaps in some ways assisting in this perpetuation. That doesn't mean that I'm blaming the victim; instead I'm trying to look at the problem more objectively. Parents need to education their children early on about the consequence of teenage pregnancies. They need to be told that it's not cool to prove to their peers and to each other that they are grown and ready to start families. Education has to take place in the classrooms as well. If parents don't want someone else telling their kids about sex and drugs -- then they should talk to them about these issues.

Nine years later and, for me, the feeling of being robbed still exists. It's not as strong a feeling as it used to be, but it's still there. I think perhaps it will eventually go away as my child continues to grow and I regain a part of my life. I can stay late after work and hang out with my co-workers instead of rushing home to care for my child. However, nine years is a long time to be deprived of such simple movements. It's a lot of dependency, money, and hard work. Thirteen, 14, 15, and 16 years old is too young to have so many joyful experiences halted and perhaps gone forever.